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John Sharples

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Sky and Stardust: The Flying Saucer in American Popular Culture, 1947–1957

John Sharples

Lancaster University

Introduction

This essay investigates the relationship between the flying saucer within post-war American popular culture and narratives of home, technology, and authority. As an object embodying a specific cultural moment, the flying saucer became a nodal point, a discursive centre, where discussion of aesthetics, power and modernity came together, projected into the minds of Americans via print media, advertisements, songs and material culture. As an alternative focal point of post-war culture to the atomic bomb, blue suede shoes or Marilyn Monroe, the flying saucer was a bright light cast against darkening skies, revealing an American audience looking optimistically towards a utopian future and guardedly back at the massive destruction of twentieth-century global conflict. As a 'monster,' this symbol of modernity possessed a certain plasticity of identity, evoking variously and non-linearly feelings of fear and fascination, even playfulness. As an historical object, assessed in relation to technological and social change, the flying saucer eventually became thoroughly domesticated and acclimated within American society. Between Kenneth Arnold's sighting which sparked national interest in the phenomenon on 24 June 1947 and the launch of Sputnik I on 4 October 1957, over 5,000 flying saucer observations were reported to the United States Air Force (USAF). In 1950, five or six sightings per day were logged,[1] before spiking in 1952, when more flying saucers were spotted 'than at any time since the initial flood' in 1947, totalling 1,700.[2] Reports became more sporadic in 1953 when only 429 sightings were received, subsequently declining further to 'hardly more than a trickle.'[3] Sputnik's launch saw the flying saucer eclipsed to a degree as the generational other, taking its place within a genealogy of historical threats from above.

Historiography

The flying saucer has most often been viewed from its role in science fiction and cinema. Works such as M. Keith Booker's *Alternative Americas: Science Fiction and American Culture* (2006)[4] and Mark Jancovich's essay 'Re-Examining the 1950s Invasion Narrative' (1996)[5] have impressively covered the issue. Less well-considered has been the way popular non-fictional accounts of the phenomenon of the flying saucer questioned official, institutional and scientific explanations, inviting readers to participate in the debate, subverting accepted

CONTACT John Sharples jjsharples@live.co.uk

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Notes

1. Drew Pearson, 'Air Force Checking Job Shows "Flying Saucers" Do Not Exist,' St. Petersburg Times, 25 November 1950, p. 6.

2. AP, 'Flying Saucers Spotted Again,' Lewiston Morning Tribune, 22 July 1952, p. 1.

3. Arthur Edson (AP), ‘It’s Summer! That Means It’s “Flying Saucer” Time,’ Eugene Register-Guard, 24 July 1955, p. 7.

4. M. Keith Booker, Alternative Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture (Westport, CT, 2006).

5. Mark Jancovich, ‘Re-Examining 1950s Invasion Narratives,’ in Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s (Manchester, 1996), pp. 26–49.

6. Terry Kirk, ‘Monumental Monstrosity, Monstrous Monumentality,’ Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal, 40 (2008), p. 7.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., p. 8.

9. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses),’ in Monster Theory: Reading Culture (Minneapolis, 1996), p. 4.

10. Ibid., p. 5.

11. Kirk, ‘Monumental Monstrosity,’ Perspecta, p. 7.

12. Ibid.

13. See also: Jan Bondeson’s The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History (New York, 1999) and James W. Cook, The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum (Cambridge, MA, 2001), Back Cover.

14. See also: Patricia Barbeito, ‘“He's Making Me Feel Things in My Body That I Don't Feel”: The Body as Battleground in Accounts of Alien Abduction,’ Journal of American Culture, 28(2) (June 2005), pp. 201–215.

15. Susan Lepselter, ‘Why Rachel Isn’t Buried In Her Grave: Ghosts, UFOs and a Place in the West,’ in Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding (eds.), Histories of the Future (Durham, N.C., 2005), p. 257.

16. Ibid., p. 261.

17. AP, ‘Pilot Sees “Saucer-like Objects” Flying at 1,200 m.p.h. in Oregon,’ 25 June 1947. This article was reprinted widely, for example, in The Montreal Gazette, 26 June 1947, p. 1.

18. Ken Hollings, Welcome to Mars: Fantasies of Science in the American Century, 1947–1959 (London, 2008), p. 15.

19. This is a matter of some dispute. See: http://ufoupdateslist.com/1999/mar/m17-009.shtml (UFO Updates, 17 March 1999) – accessed 29 April 2015.

20. 'The Somethings,' Time, 14 July 1947.

21. Hollings, Welcome to Mars, p. 11.

22. Allan Lloyd-Smith, American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction (New York, 2005), p. 2.

23. http://brain.gallup.com/documents/questionnaire.aspx?STUDY=AIPO0455&p=1 (Gallup Poll asking people about their familiarity with various terms, 28 April 1950, also asked on 23 July 1947, 28 April 1950, 2 May 1950, and 29 August 1952) – accessed 1 August 2014.

24. Edward J. Ruppelt, The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects [Henceforth RUFO] (New York, 1956), p. 5.

25. Cohen, 'Preface: In a Time of Monsters,' in Monster Theory: Reading Culture, p. viii.

26. Ibid., p. x.

27. From Jacques Derrida, 'Some Statements and Truisms About Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms' (1987), quoted in Nicholas Royle, Jacques Derrida: Routledge Critical Thinkers (Oxon., 2003), p. 111.

28. Ibid., pp. 7–8.

29. Further comments from Arnold partially support his contention that he was misquoted. On 26 June 1947, United Press quoted Arnold saying, 'They were shaped like saucers and were so thin I could barely see them.' Associated Press noted that, 'He also described the objects as 'saucer-like' and their motion 'like a fish flipping in the sun.' ... He said they appeared to fly almost as if fastened together.' The Chicago Tribune added Arnold's supposed observation that 'They were silvery and shiny and seemed to be shaped like a pie plate. ... I am sure they were separate units because they weaved in flight like the tail of a [Chinese] kite' (http://ufoupdateslist.com/1999/mar/m17-009.shtml (UFO Updates, 17 March 1999) – accessed 29 April 2015).

30. http://www.project1947.com/fig/kamurrow.htm (‘Transcript of Ed Murrow-Kenneth Arnold Telephone Conversation,’ 7 April 1950) – accessed 29 April 2015.

31. Quoted in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ‘What is Visual Culture?’ in The Visual Culture Reader (London, 2002. 2nd ed.), p. 5.

32. Nicholas Mirzoeff, An Introduction to Visual Culture (London, 1999), p. 15.

33. UP, ‘Reports Of Mystery Objects In Kansas, Minnesota Skies …,’ Times-News (North Carolina), 23 May 1951, p. 1.

34. AP, ‘Is It A Ball O’Fire Or Flash In The Pan,’ Miami News, 27 September 1954, p. 7.

35. AP, ‘Mysterious Ball Of Fire Ties Up Oklahoma Traffic,’ Victoria Advocate, 27 September 1954, p. 1.

36. AP, ‘Flying Disc Jams Traffic,’ Sarasota Journal, 27 September 1954, p. 2.

37. Donald H. Menzel, ‘The Truth About Flying Saucers,’ Look, 17 June 1952, pp. 35–39.

38. David L. Martin, Curious Visions of Modernity (Cambridge, MA, 2012), Front Flap.

39. Hollings, Welcome to Mars, p. xiii.

40. Hollings, Welcome to Mars, p. 12.

41. http://www.project1947.com/fig/look61752.htm (Kenneth Arnold, ‘I Did See the Flying Disks,’ FATE Magazine, Spring 1948) – accessed 29 April 2015.

42. Hollings, Welcome to Mars, p. 13.

43. These advancements also permeated into the domestic space. Sold on the promise of the future, each Levittown house (See also: Lynn Spiegel, Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs (Durham, NC, 2001)), for example, came with a refrigerator, stove, a Bendix washer, and a built-in Admiral television set (http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9,171,812,779,00.html (‘Up From The Potato Fields,’ TIME, 3 July 1950) – accessed 4 August 2014) - ‘space-age technology in a space-age home’ (Hollings, Welcome to Mars, p. 5).

44. Waldemar Kaempffert, ‘Those Strange Little Men; Flying Saucers. By Donald H. Menzel,’ New York Times, 1 March 1953, p. 10.

45. Martin, Curious Visions of Modernity, p. xiii.

46. A Gallup Poll from 1996 revealed that forty-five per cent of those surveyed believed aliens had visited the earth. In 2010, a CBS News poll found thirty per cent believed the same thing. Further, thirty-three per cent believed in ghosts, thirty –seven per cent in haunted houses and twenty-one per cent in witches. Peter Dendle states that 'folklorists and other cultural interpreters of the future will have every right, retrospectively, to say that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries many people still quaintly believed in "monsters", such as Bigfoot, lake monsters, aliens, and ghosts.' (From Peter J. Dendle, 'Conclusion: Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,' in Asa Simon Mittman (ed.), The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous (Farnham, 2012), pp. 442–3).

47. Susan Lepselter, 'The Flight of the Ordinary: Narrative, Poetics, Power and UFOs in the American Uncanny,' PhD Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005, p. x.

48. That the flying saucer was discussed in places such as Life should indicate how widely the phenomenon permeated. As a sign of Life's popularity, for example, in 'just thirteen weeks in the early 1950s, over one half of Americans had seen a particular issue.'.

49. 'Farmer Trent's Flying Saucer,' Life, 26 June 1950, p. 40.

50. 'Flying Saucer,' Life, 17 July 1950, p. 12.

51. David Punter, Modernity (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 210.

52. Relman Morin (AP), 'Flying Saucer Found To Be Old Discovery …,' Portsmouth Times (Ohio), 7 August 1952, p. 30.

53. Arthur Edson (AP), 'Briton Arrives In U.S. To Seek Flying Saucers,' Sarasota Herald-Tribune, 2 June 1954, p. 16.

54. Relman Morin (AP), 'Flying Saucers Old, Old Story,' Spokesman Review, 7 August 1952, p. 18.

55. 'Q's & A's,' Altus Times-Democrat, 28 April 1953, p. 6.

56. Robert L. Unger, 'Flying Saucers Are Old Stuff,' Popular Science, May 1952, p. 45.

57. There was also perhaps an eagerness to construct what Arnold saw as something it was not, to mould it into a particular and more familiar science-fictional shape. Time's 'The Somethings' article, as if to make the link even more explicit, began with a passage of H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds (1898), describing something rushing 'up into the sky and out of the grayness … very swiftly into the luminous clearness above the clouds …; something flat and broad, and very large, that swept round in a vast curve' ('The Somethings,' Time, 14 July 1947).

58. http://www.frankwu.com/Paul-8.html ('Gallery of Frank R. Paul's Science Fiction Artwork') – accessed 29 April 2015.

59. John Block Friedman, 'Foreword,' in Mittman (ed.), The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous, p. xxvi.

60. Mittman, 'Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies,' in The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous, pp. 7–8.

61. Hollings, Welcome to Mars, p. 14.

62. Ibid., p. 13.

63. Ibid., p. 14.

64. Ruppelt, RUFO, p. 6.

65. Ibid.

66. A similar process can be charted regarding representations of alien visitors. Preceding Susan Lepselter's essay in the anthology Histories of the Future, is a family tree of-sorts charting changes in the depictions of aliens, varying in height, shape, colour, the number of limbs, and so on. The illustration begins with 'little green men,' moving onto 'hairy dwarfs,' 'reptilians,' and 'lizard men' (Timeline of Aliens' (illustration), in Rosenberg and Harding (eds.), Histories of the Future, p. 256). All come under the category 'aliens,' whilst differing substantially, marked by difference and otherness somehow.

67. 'Flying Saucer Pajamas,' Life, 25 August 1952, p. 38.

68. 'Sylvania TV With Bigger Better-Than-Ever Halolight,' Life, 13 October 1952, p. 55.

69. 'Statler Hotels' (advertisement), Life, 5 January 1953, p. 58.

70. Carl Jung, Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth Of Things In The Sky (New York, 1997), Back Cover.

71. http://www.abomb1.org/hiroshim/laurenc1.html (William L. Lawrence, 'Eye Witness Account: Atomic Bomb Mission Over Nagasaki,' 9 August 1945) – accessed 29 April 2015.

72. Cynthia Hendershot, Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films (Ohio, 1999), p. 76.

73. Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses),' in Monster Theory: Reading Culture, pp. 7, 9, 17.

74. Ibid., p. 17.

75. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12,762 (Harry S. Truman, 'Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,' 6 January 1947) – accessed 4 August 2014.

76. William J. Levitt quoted in Neil Postman, 'Philo Farsworth,' in Dan Rather and Walter Isaacson, People of the Century (New York, 1999), p. 243.

77. Jerome Clark, The UFO Book: Encyclopedia of the Extra-terrestrial (Detroit, 1998), p. 653. Italics in quoted passage added by the author for clarity and emphasis.

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid., p. 655.

80. Ibid., p. 660.

81. Ibid., p. 659.

82. Susan Michaels, Sightings: UFOs (New York, 1997), p. 22.

83. Curtis Peebles, Watch the Skies! A Chronicle of the Flying Saucer Myth (New York, 1994), p. 79.

84. 'Washington's Blips,' Life, 4 August 1952, pp. 39–40.

85. Dendle, 'Conclusion: Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,' in Mittman (ed.), The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous, p. 446.

86. Ibid.

87. See, for example, Robert Martin's 'Livernois Avenue Fights Back' in Life, 22 March 1954, p. 104, which reported on a car sales-man who accepted a flying-saucer model as trade-in and used it for advertising outside his dealership. On the phone the dealer Clyde Headrick had smoothly asked 'What model flying saucer?' and for the customer to 'bring it around for appraisal.' This story was worked into a Chevrolet advertisement, displayed in Life, 17 October 1955, p. 22, which ran the line '$400 trade-in allowance on a flying saucer.'.

88. Dendle, 'Conclusion: Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,' in Mittman (ed.), The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous, pp. 446–7.

89. AP, 'Mysterious Objects Whizzing Over U.S.? Officials Skeptical,' 26 June 1947.

90. Mikael Rothstein, 'The Rise and Decline of the First-Generation UFO Contactees: A Cognitive Approach,' in James R. Lewis (ed.), The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions (New York, 2003), p. 66.

91. Donald Keyhoe, The Flying Saucers Are Real (New York, 1950), pp. 5–7.

92. Hendershot, Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films, p. 127.

93. Keyhoe, Flying Saucers, p. 14.

94. Vern Haugland (AP), 'Air Force Denies Report Parts Of Saucers Found,' Deseret News and Telegraph, 23 March 1954, p. 8A. When asked if he had ever seen a flying saucer in July 1947, President Harry Truman replied, 'only in the newspapers.' Quoted in Matthew Algeo, Harry Truman's Excellent Adventure (Chicago, 2009), p. 175.

95. http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~raha/700_701_web/BarthesLO/readerly.html ('Barthes and Text: Readerly and Writerly Texts,' University of Waterloo) - accessed 3 February 2014.

96. Ibid.

97. Menzel, 'The Truth About Flying Saucers,' Look, 17 June 1952. See also: Donald Menzel, Flying Saucers: Myth – Truth – History (Harvard University Press, 1953). Project Blue Book had labelled saucers 'mirage effects caused by double inversion'

[temperature change] or ‘meteors coupled with the normal excitement of witnesses’ (Clark, The UFO Book, p. 661).

98. Robert E. Ginna Jr., ‘Saucer Reactions,’ Life, 9 June 1952, p. 20.

99. Ibid., p. 26.

100. Ralph Steiner, ‘How to Expose Flying Saucers,’ Popular Science, January 1953, p. 227.

101. INS, ‘Saucer Story Hit By Expert,’ Miami News, 13 February 1951, p. 1A.

102. ‘Have We Visitors From Space?’ Life, 7 April 1952, p. 82.

103. Ibid., p. 94.

104. Ibid., p. 96.

105. ‘Out Of This World,’ Life, 9 January 1950, p. 24.

106. ‘What Were The Flying Saucers? Eyewitnesses Believe They Saw Secret Craft,’ Popular Science, August 1951, p. 74.

107. Lepselter, ‘Why Rachel Isn’t Buried In Her Grave: Ghosts, UFOs and a Place in the West,’ in Rosenberg and Harding (eds.), Histories of the Future, pp. 259–60.

108. ‘2 More Solutions To Flying Saucer Puzzle Won’t Hurt,’ Billboard, 26 July 1947, p. 82.

109. ‘A Saucer Session for Spaceship Sighters,’ Life, 27 May 1957, p. 117.

110. ‘Peck’s Bad Boy From Outer Space,’ Life, 4 March 1957, p. 87.

111. The Buchanan Brothers, ‘(You Got To Pray To The Lord) When You See Those Flying Saucers,’ Cy Coben-Charlie Green, RCA Victor, 1947.

112. J.W. Wylie, Landscape (Abingdon, 2007), p. 73.

113. Vanessa R. Schwartz, ‘Walter Benjamin for Historians,’ American Historical Review, 106(5) (December 2001), p. 1,740.

114. Bill Buchanan and Dickie Goodman, ‘The Flying Saucer’ (a.k.a. ‘The Flying Saucer Parts 1 and 2’), Luniverse, 1956.

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